

A Strange But Familiar Country

Robert Sheckley

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By Robert Sheckley

Denis left home and took a trip that brought him to a city in a country he'd never seen before or even heard of.

He arrived in the new city by train, perhaps, or plane. Or possibly even by bus, though horseback could not to be entirely discounted.

He walked around for a while, admiring the architecture.

Toward evening, he went into a bar for a glass of wine. There was a man drinking at the bar, a very large, well-dressed man with long, pointed teeth. He also had small tusks protruding from his mouth. By this Denis knew he was an ogre.

There was a considerable knowledge of ogres where Denis came from. There were different theories about them, but everyone warned against them. They were considered dangerous.

"Nice day," the ogre said.

"Yes, it is," Denis agreed, because he had been taught it was only politic to be nice to ogres.

"You're new in this city," the ogre said.

"Yes, I am."

"Well, it's my city. I own it. Every building and every person in it."

"Wow," Denis said politely, not quite knowing what else to say.

"Would you like to come to dinner?" the ogre said.

Denis didn't, but knew you were never supposed to say no to an ogre. He said he'd be delighted.

The ogre handed him a card on which was his address.

Then he said, "I suppose you've heard a lot of talk about ogres."

"Well, you know, just gossip."

"I can tell you, we ogres are generally considered a fearsome lot. But we are not without manners. You will be my guest at dinner not just for tonight but for the next two nights."

"That is very kind of you."

"We ogres can be kind. There's a catch, of course, but it needn't worry you."

"What is the catch?"

"For three nights I will provide your dinners. But if you are still here in the city on the fourth night, you will be my dinner."

"That doesn't sound so good," Denis said.

"I said it needn't concern you. All you have to do is leave before the fourth day is up."

"It's really as simple as that?"

"Just as simple as that. Good bye. See you tonight around seven pm. You'll have no trouble finding my house"

Denis decided he was safe enough. He would stay this first day, dine with the ogre in the evening, then leave in the morning.

He wandered around the city, went into a bar for a glass of wine, and met the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She seemed taken with him, too, and even bought him a drink. She had to leave suddenly, but told him they would meet again.

He went to dinner that night at the Ogre's mansion, which he found without even trying. The ogre was charming. The beautiful woman was there too, she was a cousin of the ogre, and she seemed even more interested in Denis than before. At the end of the meal, she gave him unmistakable signs that he was to follow her. And the ogre gave him an invitation for the next evening.

Denis followed the woman out into the street. He walked with her to her home, but she wouldn't let him in. "

I don't dare," she said. "My old boy friend has unexpectedly returned. He is very jealous, so much so that he is likely to kill anyone he saw with me."

Denis didn't like the sound of that. But she promised to take care of everything, and assured him they would get together soon. She kissed him hastily and went into her house. Denis returned to his hotel room, which the ogre had provided for him free. It was quite a decent hotel, but not as nice as several others further down the block.

Next morning, he decided that although everyone was being nice, he really ought to get out of this city, because his host after all, despite his excellent manners and general air of sympathy, was a tusked and toothed ogre. One night with the ogre was enough! Denis had been taught from childhood to beware of ogres and to put no trust in them.

Time to go! He walked to the outskirts of the city, and set off in the direction of the hills he could see faintly in the far distance. He walked all day, through barren, scrubby lands. He had forgotten to take a lunch, and so grew very hungry.

By nightfall he was tired. He saw a building ahead. To his surprise, it was the back of the ogre's mansion. The ogre was sitting in the garden, in a deckchair, beside a fountain.

"I hope you had a nice stroll," The ogre said. "Now it is time for dinner."

Denis found this unpleasant and more than a little disquieting. Still, he had two days left. He knew there was no real cause for alarm.

The dinner that second night was utterly splendid. There were guests, and Denis listened to bright and intelligent talk. There were several good-looking woman, though none so fine as the ogre's cousin, who was also there. There was even an orchestra, and they were playing all his favorite songs. He danced with the ogre's cousin and it

was fine, utterly fine. He was saddened when the leader told him the orchestra would be back next week with an even finer program. Alas, he knew he would not be there!

That evening, the cousin was more flirtatious with him than before. She even led him to a bedroom on the second floor. But although he was expecting great things, he was sadly disappointed. When he timidly tried to take her hand, she was astonished at his temerity. She just wanted to show him some paintings she had done as a child. Some people thought they showed promise...

When he tried to kiss her, she evaded him. She was elusive but she told him that she adored him. But there was a difficulty. She didn't tell him what the difficulty was. Finally he returned alone to his hotel.

The next day was the third day, the last free day before becoming the ogre's meal the day after. He decides he had better get going.

He walked through the city. On the way through the narrow streets he passed a man in a tall white chef's hat, who grinned at him in a familiar way but didn't speak. Denis continued walking.

Later he passed the ogre's mansion again--the place seemed to spring up everywhere--and, as he went by, he heard screaming, and coarse laughter. Peering in through the lower windows, he saw the kitchen, and the fellow he saw earlier in the tall white hat was there, laughing, and he is clutching some poor fellow and urging him toward a very large pot.

Denis realized that the terrified man was one of the guests from the previous night. One who must have dined for three nights, and was to be dinner the fourth.

He hurried away from the horrid sight, came to a beach at the end of the city, and found a small sail boat on it. He pushed it into the sea and set sail.

He sailed for many hours. He was out of sight of land, lost. He knew he should have taken time to find a chart, so at least he'd know which direction to sail in. Searching around the boat, he found a map in a locker. The map indicated a direction, and gave instructions as to where a compass was stored. He had a lot of trouble finding the compass--the locker it was in had a tricky way of opening. It was evening and he saw a beach ahead. He landed, and the ogre was there, sitting in a deck chair, smoking a cigar.

"I hope you enjoyed your sail on my pond," the ogre said. The boat was of course free for anyone staying in the hotel.

The ogre reminded him of the invitation that night, and said that his cousin is eager to see him again.

How quickly the days have speeded by! Dinner tonight with the ogre, the last one, and then the next day...

It was already apparent that whatever Denis did, he was going to

wind up in the city again on the fourth day, with the ogre. Obviously, the ogre's domains were everywhere one could get to in this territory. If he could neither walk out nor sail out, he wasn't likely to get out without help, which he didn't think he'd find. Telling him he could go when he liked was apparently a cruel joke on the ogre's part. But he still had a day left. Was there somewhere he could hide where the ogre wouldn't find him?

He thought of going underground. But he'd already seen, on the previous day, that the kitchens were down there, and by the wails he heard, he knew there were other people to whom the ogre had made the same offer.

He dined with the ogre that night, and the cousin was there, more flirtatious than ever. When the ogre went to get another bottle of wine and they had a chance alone, she breathlessly told him he was the only man for her, and that she was determined they will marry next month. The youth didn't think he'd live to see next month. He wanted to explain his situation, but the ogre returned before he could tell her.

She evaded him again at the end of the dinner, and Denis and returned alone again to his hotel.

He spent the last safe day moping around and trying to think his position through.

Suffice it to say that the evening of the fourth day arrived. Denis had remembered a story his school teacher back home once told him. In one of his discourses, the Buddha made a simile, asking if a dying man would hold off treatment while he found out who poisoned him, and by what means.

Denis didn't know how this pertained to his case, but he thought maybe it did, and he also thought the Buddha may have been wrong, or the story wrongly ascribed to him. It seemed to the youth that sometimes you needed to know what the disease was before you could make a treatment for it.

He wasn't sure what to make of this, but hoped something would come to him.

That night he went to the ogre for the fourth and final time.

The ogre led him to the dining room, and said, "At least we can have a glass of wine together before the unpleasantness." The girl was not there.

"She said she had another appointment," the ogre said.

"Ah," said Denis.

"Yes, it's a disappointment. She seems quite taken with you."

"She's the loveliest thing I've ever seen."

"Yes, she is, isn't she? Doesn't get it from my side of the family!" The ogre poured the wine. They drank. The ogre said, "As long as we're having a drink, might as well have some snacks." Appetizers

appeared. Then a main course was brought on without explanation. Denis ate. The ogre seemed disturbed about something.

The youth asked if something was wrong.

"This is a little embarrassing," the ogre says. "You remember that fellow in the white hat who stared at you so rudely the other day? That was my head cook who wanted to get an idea of your size before cooking you. Well, everything was ready, the right size pot was procured, I was going to have you parboiled with a white sauce--there's something fishy about you, no insult intended--but then the wretched fellow had to fall ill. He can't cook tonight. But he's planned it again, three days from now, and he swears nothing will stand in the way. If necessary, if he's not well enough, he will have his nephew slaughter and cook you, and make the white sauce. The nephew is not as good a cook, but at least he's healthy and reliable. This being the case, you might as well meet my cousin tomorrow. She wanted you to know she'll be at the little bridge over the river at noon, and she'd be delighted to see you."

"I thank you for your hospitality," Denis said. "But if you will release me from your kingdom, I really think I'd like to be on my way. And you can play your tricks on someone else. And that goes for your cousin, too. By the way, I think I know your name now."

"How did you figure it out?"

"I considered your characteristics. You are generous, but cruel. You do favors, but in order for the recipient to feel greater loss thereafter. You are the lord of confusion and ambiguity. Who would fit those characteristics? Only Fear, which is your name."

"Well, you're right. I don't think I mentioned that if you guess my name, you are free of me. But perhaps you'll agree there's a lot out there to fear."

"No," said Denis. "There's very little out there to fear. But a lot in here"--he tapped his head--"there's a lot to fear. And you can tell your cousin that I never want to see her again."

"Do you know her name, too?"

"Yes. She is Disappointment."